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ABSTRACT

The practice of teaching reading should be based on the nature and dignity of human beings. The major problem in the study of reading is that the reading model on which pedagogy is based is inconsistent with this view of persons. The view that reading is a skills-determined, linear process in which readers decode, process, and retrieve information is based on a computer model and implies that skills teaching should be preeminent. Reading is not a linear process, however, but a cyclical and synergistic activity, an interaction between the reader, content, and strategies; this model is more promising as a teaching model than is the linear model. The teaching of reading must consider the relation of the text to the readers' understandings and attitudes as well as strategies; these strategies do not develop in isolation from their use. Specific recommendations from this theory include the following: select texts that are meaningful to the reader; recognize that learning to read is a lifelong process; affect the reader's knowledge, feelings, and inclinations about the reading task; encourage students to see the relationship between text and previous knowledge, suggest and model strategies that are appropriate to the text; provide much reading opportunity in school; use content area readings; and recognize that comprehension may not be testable by standard measures. (DF)

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CONGRUENCE IN PHILOSOPHY AND PEDAGOGY OF READING

A paper in a symposium

entitled

Reading Through the Lifespan in an Exploding Society

May 3, 1978

International Reading Association

Houston, Texas

In Philosophical Investigations (1953), Ludwig Wittgenstein, perhaps the outstanding philosopher of the twentieth century, said, "To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life [p. 8]." To read is to participate in a form of life, and from this two important implications result. One is that it is

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in principle impossible that anything other than a human being could experience the event of reading. A computer reads cards if they have not been folded, stapled, or mutilated. A pigeon reads colored discs to ascertain the location of pieces of corn. A thermostat reads the temperature of the room in order to keep us comfortable. A child reads a book and laughs or cries. But the word "read" is being used in very different ways here. When the computer and the pigeon and the thermostat "read," they are not doing anything like what the child is doing, like what you are doing right now. They do not participate in our form of life. Do not assume that different uses of the same word must have something in common, a shared meaning which is their essence. As Wittgenstein cautions, "Don't say: 'There must be something common or they would not all be called (by the same name) --but look and see whether there is anything common to all [p. 31].'" Our language deceives us at times, makes us assume what is not so. "Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language [p. 47]."

The second implication follows from the first. Whatever we do to teach reading should be firmly based in our convictions about the nature and dignity of human beings. For my own part,

and this idea by no means enjoys universal acceptance (cf. Skinner, Beyond Freedom and Dignity, 1971), human beings have judgment, they have free will, they have complex emotions. Their form of life is so infinitely complex that, like infinity, it is generally taken for granted. We are probably not much closer to understanding it than we were 3,000 years ago. Perhaps because of this, many people, and not just psychologists and educators, have, in George Miller's (1972) words, "come to take for granted...that men and computers are merely two different species of a more abstract genus called information processing systems." The idea of reading as information processing is appealing, people are attracted to the computer metaphor as an explanation of thinking. But, as Ulric Neisser points out in his new book, Cognition and Reality (1976), "the study of information processing has not yet committed itself to any conception of human nature that could apply beyond the confines of the laboratory. And within that laboratory, its basic assumptions go little further than the computer model to which it owes its existence [p. 6]."

The major problem confronting us in the study of reading is that the model of reading on which most pedagogy is based is incongruent with our basic notions of what it means to be a human being. The prevailing view is that reading is a

skills-determined linear process, schematically represented by Figure 1. The reader is exposed to text, something to read. He or she discovers information or meaning in the text by processes such as decoding, recognizing the main idea, visualizing, finding details, etc. Next, the reader processes information in some way or another which leads to understanding and storage. Last, and this is the crucial step, the reader can retrieve the information, or "true and literal meaning" of the text, in approximately the same form as it appeared. Any interpretations are to be justified with reference to this meaning. (Surely if a computer could read, as in "The child read the book," we would describe its activity in terms similar to these.)

There are two important pedagogical implications of this view. First, it is reading skills which determine comprehension and, second, those skills are susceptible to direct instruction irrespective of text. According to this model, the criterion of success is retrieval of information. Input, processing, retrieval; call this the computer model of reading if you will. The teacher's job is to program the right skills into the machine as directed by the manual, with every comma and every period in exactly the right place.

The issue here is whether we are to base our pedagogy on what computers can do or in what we understand about human beings. The computer (on which most models of linguistic behavior are based) cannot participate with human beings in their form of life, and hence whatever a computer can be made to do has, in the words of Joseph Weizenbaum (1976), "only the faintest relation to human understanding and human intelligence [p. 213]." As he argues, there is an infinite difference between computer power and human reason, between calculation and judgment. The fact that computers cannot read or engage with us in any linguistic behavior is not a technological problem; it is in principle an impossibility.

I would like to propose that reading is not a linear process at all but rather a cyclic activity, typical of the way in which human beings try to understand. What I propose in Figure 2 is derived from Ulric Neisser's (1976) diagram of the cyclic nature of perception. The assumption is that comprehension is an activity of which perception is an example and that reading comprehension is an instance of the general tendency of human beings to be affected by and to affect the world in which they live.

I am proposing that a more appropriate view of reading would suggest a process which is cyclic and synergistic rather than linear. The term synergistic is borrowed from biology

where it is used to refer to the action of two or more organs to achieve an effect of which each is individually incapable. The "parts" of the reading process form a synergistic interaction, but the whole precedes the parts. Reading is an interaction of the content of what is read, the person who is reading it, and the strategies employed for its purpose. It is the interaction rather than the parts which constitute the process.

The "text" may be of many different kinds--stories, fables, novels, essays, expositions, summaries, poems, plays, programs, schedules, calendars. And whatever the kind, text is read in context, always a part of something larger than itself, always in a situation wherein the reader also exists. Some, like Stanley Fish (1970), have gone so far as to suggest that it is this context, of which the reader and what is read are a part, that determines the meaning of what is read. In Fish's terms, "meaning is an event," it is something that happens to the reader as a result of reading. (Fish distinguishes meaning, something which happens to the reader, from information, the content of text.) It might be added that text is always more or less appropriate with respect to the needs, interests, and abilities of the reader. Such considerations will

determine the meaning of what is read, i.e., the effect of what is read on the person reading. Notice how much of this is susceptible to influence through instruction. Students' needs, interests, and abilities are exactly the points of focus we should have in teaching.

Cognition, volition, and affect (refer again to Figure 2); what I earlier called judgment, will, and emotion. "Convergences of large numbers of mental phenomena [p. 7]" in the words of Jerome Shafer (1968), professor of philosophy at the University of Connecticut and executive secretary of the Carnegie-supported Council for Philosophical Studies. In these terms are human beings defined. Cognition includes thought and belief, understanding, imagining, remembering, knowing how and knowing that. Affect includes sensations, feelings, emotions, moods, frames of mind. Volition includes desires, motives, decisions, intentions, trying, behavior traits. All of which overlap, crisscross, and interrelate in myriad ways to define every individual. Another way of labeling this point in the diagram would be to call it what the reader is, determined by his or her age and experience, both of which are constantly changing, partly as a result of reading. Paradoxically, it is what the reader is which determines the meaning of experiences like reading and yet it is the experiences (combined with factors of maturity and genetic endowment) which determine what the the reader is. Text and reader exist in a context of which

each is a part, and the effect is somewhat reciprocal.

I am advancing a phenomenological perspective on the reading process, the foundation of which is found in the school of literary criticism known as "reception aesthetics" (Leitch, 1977). It is not my purpose to explain this in any depth here, but I believe the following quote from Wolfgang Iser (1974), the leading European member of the school, adequately sumarizes the perspective:

> The literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic andthe aesthetic: The artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the aesthetic to the realization created by the reader. From this polarity it follows that the literary work cannot be completely identical with the text, or with the realization of the text, but in fact must lie halfway between the two... The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader [p. 125].

It is worth noting here that the most common alternative view treats reading comprehension as primarily a cognitive phenomenon by which readers comprehend meaning which exists in the text. We have commonly looked at changes in understanding, remembering, or knowing (we might call it reduction of uncertainty, after Frank Smith) as the definientia of comprehension. But one could as easily argue that comprehension is essentially an affective phenomenon which is merely evidenced in cognitive or volitional changes, changes in what the reader knows or is inclined to do. It was Bartlett, in 1932, who made the point that "when a subject is being asked to remember (from reading), very often the first thing that emerges is something of the nature of attitude. The recall is then a construction, made largely on the basis of this attitude, and its general effect is that of a justification of the attitude [p. 207]."

Bartlett also happens to be the first psychologist to make use of the term schema, currently being defined as "abstract symbolic representations of knowledge which we express and describe in language, but which are nevertheless not themselves linguistic (Rumelhart & Ortony, 1977, p. 111)." It would be inappropriate here to launch a full scale discussion or criticism of schema theory. Suffice it to say that the current most popular definition of comprehension is "the process of selecting and verifying conceptual schemata to account for

the situation (or text) to be understood (Rumelhart, 1977, p. 268)." Which selection and verification (and this is my point in bringing it up) is undoubtedly affected by and affects cognition, volition, and affect. Our understanding of the reading act, even from the perspective of schema theory, will depend on our realization that it is the nature of human beings which determines the nature and results of reading and of the meaning of what is read.

Modification of schemata, of cognition, volition, and affect, is the result of comprehension. (The actual process of comprehension may not be formalizable, even in principle.) It is important to note, however, that once set in motion, the change may continue endlessly. When will those of us who were deeply moved by it ever stop understanding Thoreau's Walden? Not only is the meaning of such a book different for us each time we read it (because we are different human beings in a different context each time), but the meaning of a single reading, the effect it has, changes and continues for all our life. We reflect on such an event as Walden, it comes to mind in different situations to lend perspective and to change in perspective. Part of what it means to be a human being is that our comprehension is not static, is better described as a stage than as a state. We are continuously rather than momentarily affected, though naturally more

strongly by some things we read than by others, and that effect is what I want to call comprehension. It could only happen to a human being.

There is one more piece to the puzzle suggested by Figure 2. Reading is something people do; it is the employment of strategies in an effort to cause meaning. More accurately, the interaction of text and reader in a context is mediated by reading strategies, or explorations on the part of the reader. The idea of the cycle is critical. What we are determines what we expect and that directs us to sample certain information through exploration, confirming or disconfirming our expectations. The effect is to modify what we are and thus what we are cognitively, volitionally, and affectively capable of expecting... and so on, continuously and simultaneously.

There are many things which might make the proposed view appealing, not least that it tends to elevate the importance of the individual, to dignify the place of the human being in the event of reading. But many of its implications are less idealistic, more immediately applicable. The linear skills model alternative implies much about testing, little about teaching. Quite the contrary with the cyclic view which moves us away from a normative or psychometric perspective and, I think, toward a pedagogical perspective. I will list two general and ten

specific, important pedagogical implications as cases in point.

First, I think it is implied that what we do in teaching someone to read must derive from consideration of the nature of the text they are being asked to read in relation to the reader's understandings, inclinations, and attitudes as well as the reading strategies of which he is capable. Second, and this is also a general implication which I quote from Frank Smith (1973), "learning to read is a complex and delicate task in which almost all the rules, all the cues, and all the feedback can be obtained only through the process of reading itself. Children learn to read only by reading[p. 195]," and the reason is related to the cyclic and synergistic nature of the process. Reading strategies, like most human behaviors, do not develop in isolation from their use.

I would mention these specific implications:

(1) Text of meaningful content, of appropriate difficulty and interest to the reader, is an imperative necessity for teaching reading. Anything we might ask someone to read in hopes of becoming a better reader must have a high potential for affecting the reader. That is no more than to say that text must be potentially meaningful if it is to serve any purpose for the reader.

(2) The process of learning to read continues throughout life when that life is filled with reading. It is never true that at some life stage the person is learning to read whereas at some other stage he is reading to learn. We might rather liberally interpret "to learn" here to mean "to be affected." The child of eighteen months, the kindergartener, the third grader, the adolescent, the adult all are learning to read as a result of the effect which reading has on them.

(3) The content under study in subject areas like science, math, social studies, driver education, home economics, etc., is logically and practically ideal for teaching reading. The objectives of content area study and of reading instruction can be achieved simultaneously without conflict or sacrifice.

(4) The teaching of reading in any setting can become the facilitation of learning through reading, an approach which will simultaneously augment the reader's understanding and his ability to read. In reading class this occurs where the reading is centered on themes of general interest to the students. In content areas it occurs when reading is part of a learning environment where each student is allowed to come to individually better understanding of specific concepts around which all learning activities are focused. In both cases it is the teacher's job

to orchestrate the environment to maximize the possibility of learning by all students. Reading can and should be a vital part of that environment.

(5) The best way to facilitate learning through reading is to affect what the reader knows, how he feels about the specific learning task, and what he is inclined to do about it. This would amount to raising the reader's consciousness of what he already knows relative to the content of what is to be read or giving him necessary background information for what is to be read. A proper interest and positive inclination toward learning is crucial to the success of any reading task.

In his recent book, The Philosophy of Composition (1977), E. D. Hirsh, Jr., introduces the concept of relative readability, the potential value of the text in relation to the time and effort it requires of the reader. The facilitation of reading through learning as I am suggesting it, would raise the relative readability of the text by decreasing the time and effort required by the reader.

(6) The reader must come to appreciate the relationship and intersection between what he or she knows and what is in the text. Too often, readers must feel as if what they are or are interested in or might wish is of minor importance in

relation to the meaning in the text. Quite the opposite. One could argue that meaning isn't in the text at all; it is in the reader. Surely the reader is infinitely more important than anything he or she might read. Readers of any age deserve to feel that importance.

(7) Teachers can and should suggest and model strategies which are appropriate to particular text. For example:

a) Varying speed to suit purposes such as skimming for the general idea or reading for detail.

b) Taking notes, writing summaries, and other so-called "study skills." (This can easily be done with a group with the use of an overhead projector.)

c) Using the writer's organization pattern as an aid in organizing memory.

d) Making use of memory devices such as object association or other mnemonics.

e) Using concepts to make sense of details.

(8) Schools should provide much opportunity for reading, not relegating it to homework or limiting it to reading circle time. There is nothing more important to success in learning

to read than the opportunity to succeed in the attempt to read. If this doesn't happen in school, it won't happen at all for many students.

(9) Students need at least as much time to reflect and interact as to read. In Piaget's terms, accommodation takes as much effort as assimilation. Accommodation, in terms used earlier, is the modification of schemata, the effect of reading, whereas assimilation is the exploration and sampling of information in the text. Comprehension is initiated by reading. It continues beyond the specific act when it is stimulated in reflection and interaction with others.

(10) The final implication I will mention is a big pill to swallow. The result of reading, comprehension, may not be testable by any of the standard tests commonly employed. The corollary is that any normative view of reading (high agreement in response to questions = comprehension) can have little if anything to say about how or whether comprehension occurs or how to facilitate it. But that's a problem for testing; we were interested in teaching, weren't we?

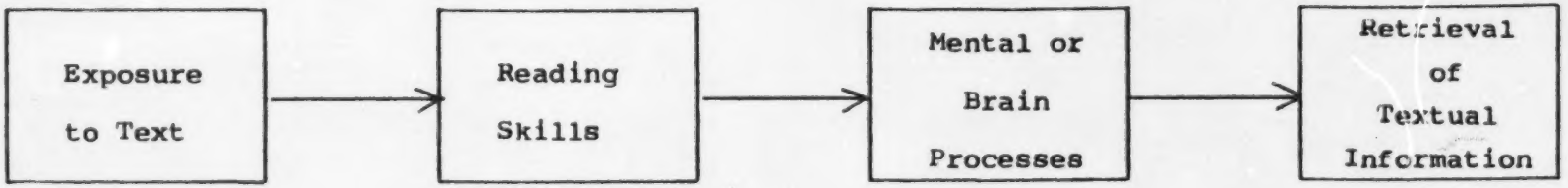

Figure 1:
Reading as a Skills-Determined Linear Process

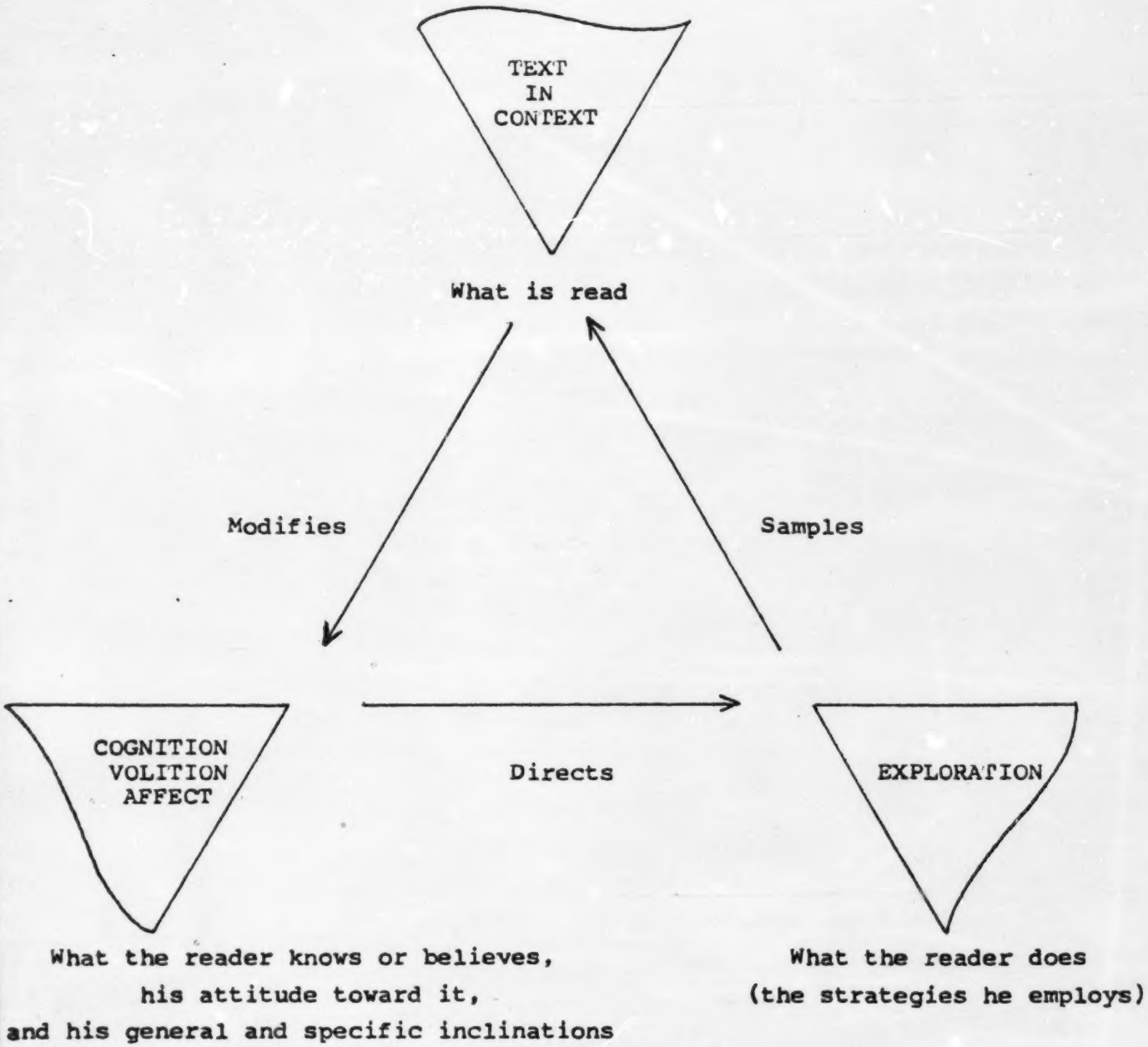

Figure 2:
A cyclic model of reading behavior (after Neisser, 1976)

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